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## CRITICISMS AND DISCUSSIONS.

### CROSS-PURPOSES IN AESTHETIC THEORY.

The recent symposium on "Mind and Medium in Art," printed in the *British Journal of Psychology* for October, 1920, affords a capital occasion for appraising the present status of aesthetics. There is surely need for such appraisal; and though a short summary like this must omit many points of interest and value, it may, by putting together both the common ground and the chief divergences adduced by the five contributors, indicate the main directions in which a sound aesthetic theory ought to proceed and the main perils which it ought to avoid.

The first two disputants advance views which bring before us a sharp opposition. Mr. Charles Marriott, who opens the discussion, contends that distinctions between the several arts should be based solely on the medium—"the tools and materials"—employed, not on any such criterion as reproduction or non-reproduction of nature, and that such distinctions cannot soundly be drawn *within* any art. Hence aesthetic enjoyment is absolutely dependent on a recognition of successful use of the medium. "If it be objected that the reason is practical, my answer is that practical and aesthetic reasons are at bottom the same thing; or, to put it another way, that aesthetic appreciation is dependent on the sense, which may not be conscious, of practical problems effectively solved" (p. 2). And again, "The objection that we can enjoy works of art without knowing how they are done, and that in moments of highest aesthetic enjoyment we become unconscious of the means, is only apparent. Directly the means are used out of character we *do* become conscious of them, whether we understand their characteristic use or not" (p. 4). Hence the conclusion that the medium employed furnishes the sole valid basis of discrimination, and that the time-honored distinction between arts and crafts is illusory.

To this bold pronouncement, Mr. A. B. Walkley opposes a more traditional doctrine. He looks with suspicion on this emphasis on

the external, and bids us turn our gaze inward. "The inquiry from without having failed to bring us to the goal, may we not have better luck in trying the method of inquiry from within? After all, that is the normal method. The history of aesthetics through the ages runs mainly along that line. Aestheticians, from Plato onwards, have nearly all agreed in supposing that art is primarily a 'function,' as the mathematicians say, of the artist's mind, rather than of his medium or of his tools" (p. 11).

In this sharp conflict of two one-sided views, it is evident that the second offers rather less hope of profitable results than the first. Aestheticians "from Plato onwards" have abounded in mistaken judgments just because they have insisted on inquiring from within, instead of ascertaining, as widely as possible, the facts of actual artistic accomplishment. Art was an element in human life long before explicit philosophizing, let alone aesthetic theorizing, began; and it is at least likely that a direct, even if hasty, approach to actual conditions will yield more profit than will a premature attempt to draw aesthetic conclusions from a general philosophical position, before the more special field has been surveyed. Aestheticians have too often been prone to shelter themselves behind great names, and to ignore facts which could not conveniently be brought under the accepted formulas.

It is just this error of premature conclusions that the fourth and fifth<sup>1</sup> contributors to the discussion avoid. Mr. Edward Bullough lays out the aesthetic field with gratifying comprehensiveness. "We would, I believe, all agree that art represents but a segment of the whole range of aesthetic activity. The aesthetic attitude embraces the appreciation of natural objects, as well as of artefacts; it covers certain borderlands of art, such as ceremonial and ritual, which have admittedly aesthetic affinities; it permeates ordinary human intercourse in what we vaguely call 'manners.' As a matter of personal conviction, I hold that there is nothing in the whole range of personal experience, from sheer sense-experience to the most abstract thought, which may not be the objects of aesthetic contemplation" (p. 27). From this hopeful beginning, he goes on to develop a theory of the static and the dynamic aspects of art, the former denoting art-objects as external things, the latter their relation to the creative artist or the actively appreciating recipient; to point out

<sup>1</sup> Exigencies of space compel me largely to pass over Dr. Watt's paper, which is more concerned with special topics than with a general survey, and is less easily summarized.

the corresponding errors of treating the artist *in vacuo* and of over-emphasizing the social aspect of art; to discuss the correlation of medium and experiment; to analyze the idea of technique; and to sketch a theory of the imagination. We have exchanged the sharp conflict of isolated views for a broad and inclusive outlook, with a gain in justness of perception that is manifest throughout Mr. Bulough's paper.

The same spirit informs the paper by Professor C. W. Valentine which closes the discussion. He, too, has a pair of errors to note in much previous theorizing. "The best known theories of the beautiful seem to err in the following respects: they take one aspect of the aesthetic experience, or one or more characteristics of certain beautiful objects, give quite convincing illustrations of these isolated factors, and then generalize as to beauty or the aesthetic experience. Very varied theories can easily arise thus; for so complex are aesthetic experiences that many varied elements may have a share in such experiences. Still more readily can we generalize if we limit our field of discussion to one of the arts" (p. 47). And again, "The whole question as to what is beauty, or what is the aesthetic experience, has been unnecessarily complicated, in my opinion, by the undue attention given to the activity of the artist. If it be granted that we can have a truly aesthetic experience without ourselves creating (externally) an object of beauty, it seems unnecessary to introduce at first a discussion of the artist's creative activity in our search for our theory of the beautiful. At least, it gives us an additional problem to solve, and in facing it there is usually a failure to recognize the extreme complexity of the mental processes involved" (p. 49).

If we now look about for the common ground on which this lively interchange goes forward, we find one portion of it in the emphasis on the concrete work of art as the only safe point of departure. "It seems perfectly clear and certain," says Dr. Watt, "that without a basis of sensory beauty there can be no work of art. Pure intuition or not, a work of art must be created, it must be embodied, and beauty must permeate its whole being, sensory, perceptual, imaginative, from whichever end of the series its soul may spring" (p. 20). It is the merit of Mr. Marriott's view that it emphasizes this; it is its defect that it emphasizes the aspect of technique too exclusively, so that, as Mr. Valentine points out, his dictum as to the importance of the medium has greater validity in its negative form.

The more unfamiliar the medium, the more conscious we are of the technique as a separable element ; though in any case, defective use of the medium is always detrimental to aesthetic satisfaction.

But to lay too much stress on the importance of the medium is clearly unwise. Indeed, we can scarcely avoid asking why, if differences of medium are so important as to be the constituent principle of the division between the arts, there may not be other differences of corresponding importance?—such as differences of temperament, attitude, intention, on the part of individual artists. These, too, might furnish an occasion for fresh groupings. On general principles, it is unlikely that the separate arts should be irreducible units ; nor does the failure of any single mode of analysis prove them to be such units. Because the differences as currently drawn are confused or hard to apply, it does not follow that they are negligible ; they may but need closer examination, and clarifying. Indeed, any term which has been long and widely used must apply to *something* ; and it surely is better to see just what degree of correspondence to truth and of application to actuality it possesses, instead of flatly discarding it.

A second point is the sense of the complexity of the aesthetic field and of its phenomena, of all which art in the stricter sense is but a segment. We, therefore, need a specific name to designate this special province ; as a provisional measure, we might restrict the name "aesthetic theory" to it. At all events, it occupies its own place, and many of the results of experimental aesthetics apply to it, but remotely or partially. In it, however, we have the aesthetic experience in its most highly developed and concentrated form, and hence use it as the field in which aesthetic qualities are best displayed, and the theoretic study of them is most richly rewarded. But to disentangle complexities aright requires us to keep our modes of approach as distinct as we can.

This field of fully developed artistic experience offers us the triad of work, artist, and recipient, each with its contribution to the total complexity, and each with its special set of dangers attendant on over-simple conceptions. The importance of the individual work has already been brought out ; but the problem of the artist, though, as Mr. Valentine says, it may wisely be postponed, can hardly be left out of account. The problem is admittedly difficult ; we may reconstruct an artist's probable attitude on insufficient or faulty evidence, and even his own testimony as to method and intention may not be wholly reliable. An artist may not be conscious of all that he has

put into his work, and himself be unable to account for the value which it ultimately assumes; and conversely, he may have done all that he intended to do, and still have accomplished nothing of permanent worth. And lastly, since works of art are not produced in a vacuum, there is the problem of the recipient; the qualities of sensitiveness, response, flexibility, range of interest, which he should have, the defects of dullness, inertia, rigidity, narrowness, of which he should rid himself; not to mention the extraneous influences of fashion, prejudice, and the like, which must be removed or allowed for.

Here are surely questions enough to provide discussion for a good while; but even if, in the interest of manageability, we set aside those raised by artist and recipient, the work itself remains if anything does, and is often our only basis for surmise as to producer or reception. We know practically nothing of the specific mentality of Egyptian craftsmen or Greek sculptors; they may not even be identifiable as individuals, but we derive very decided impressions from their works, and indeed, use them as starting-points for whatever we infer as to the artists' personalities. And what enables us to do this, if not the fact that the works were the outcome and embodiment of their creators' experience, now, by their survival, able to be adopted and incorporated into our own experience today?

If art thus mirrors experience, it is easy to account for the many **varying views** which have been held concerning its value and significance. There will be as much disagreement about them as about the corresponding traits of that general experience which art reflects. Temperamental differences will play the same part in aesthetics that they do in philosophy at large; what is vital to one observer will not always seem so to another, and such disagreements, while mankind retains its present constitution, will never be settled by argument. Despite the incidental optimism of several of the contributors to the symposium, there are very few points on which "all" will agree; and I myself have no illusions that the common ground thus **far brought out** will prove to have universal acceptability. It is enough if it commends itself to a sufficient number to make its occupation really fruitful—as indeed I believe it will.

At the same time, it is easy to exaggerate the amount of conflict which prevails both in individual aesthetic judgments and in general aesthetic theory. Dr. H. Wildon Carr has darkly alluded to "inextricable confusion," "widest divergence in the varieties of aesthetic theory," and has even gone so far as to say, "No two individuals.

whatever degree of culture they possess, seem able to be of one accord in their aesthetic judgments, nor does anyone seem able to preserve his own aesthetic judgment invariable." But after all, are such divergences really wider in aesthetics than in philosophy as a whole? I suspect that the reason that they seem so is that aesthetic views enter more extensively into ordinary discourse than do purely metaphysical positions; but surely the latter, as at present held, diverge widely enough to satisfy anyone. It is, perhaps, significant that Dr. Carr makes his sad discovery in the course of an examination<sup>2</sup> of a system which has indeed done much to introduce confusion into current discussions, and which is the direct antithesis of the position developed in this paper—the system of Croce.

Here we have neither time nor space for any real examination of Croce's doctrine; I need only say that I fully endorse the doubts expressed by Messrs. Bullough and Valentine. Like the former, I am uncertain "in particular, about the nature of the 'intuition,' the essential 'lyricism' of art, and their consequences." It is not merely that Croce's positions often seem in direct conflict with ordinary experience, but that they present notions which neither convey meaning in themselves nor help in solving aesthetic problems. What, for instance, shall we say of the dictum that "if we think of man at the first instant that the theoretic life is disclosed to him, his mind still unburdened by any abstraction or reflection, he in that first instant, purely intuitive, could be nothing but a poet"?<sup>3</sup> Does this hypothetical phantom resemble any poet we have ever heard of, or represent anything which the analysis of experience actually discloses? Or what shall we say of this: "The work of art is a spiritual fact, and therefore is never external (physical). A statue of a series of tones may be weighed and measured and counted by the physicists, who are wholly indifferent to the spiritual significance of what, to them, are external things. But for the aesthetician there exist no things which are measured, weighed, or counted; there exist only images, spiritual acts. To find a passage or a connection between the spirituality of the image and those physical complexes of colors, sounds, and voices is a desperate task."<sup>4</sup> Is the difference between bronze and marble relief sculpture a difference solely of "measuring, weighing, and counting"? Does the difference between a sequence of notes played on a flute and the same sequence played on an oboe consti-

<sup>2</sup> *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*, pp. 155, 153.

<sup>3</sup> *Problemi d'Estetica*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

tute exclusively either an immaterial image or a mere problem in acoustics? A theory of aesthetics which leaves such questions out of account is surely an oddity; and indeed Croce's whole system seems to me an extraordinarily persistent attempt to impose a set of water-tight intellectual compartments on the broad current of experience. One might even go so far as to maintain, in exact opposition to Croce, that we can conceive, say, of a physics of literature, a chemistry of literature, a psychology of literature, and a metaphysics of literature—that is to say, of the points of view of physics, chemistry, psychology, and metaphysics applied to the experience reflected in literature in a manner analogous to their application to what experience directly furnishes. This may be extreme; yet, I am not sure that it goes so far in its direction of error as Croce does in his.

But to return from the Crocean problem to our previous standpoint: it may be remarked that the latter makes it necessary to determine how close and how extensive is the contact of any particular art with experience, and whether its presentation of it is direct or indirect. Literature is obviously, of all the arts, that in which the contact is at once closest and most varied, to such a degree that under our present system of education we are prone to interpret other arts in terms of it. Yet in ages which were less subject to the tyranny of the written word, painting and sculpture conveyed many ideas which we now receive through the medium of literature. At the other extreme stands music, which has at least in modern times, been perhaps the most specialized of the arts, and certainly the one least susceptible of an informative application. As for the immediacy with which the arts present experience, literature again occupies the most intimate position, in an age when knowledge of reading and writing is so widely diffused; painting and sculpture can be directly seen, though not necessarily grasped in plastic terms; whereas music and drama by the very law of their being, need an intermediary. It is conceivable that a race of beings might exist for whom musical sounds were as direct a medium of intercourse as speech and writing are for us; but we are not such a race, and even the trained musician does not long forego the translation of written music into audible. In this field Mr. Marriott's principle of the value of technique has obvious and extensive application.

If, then, art is the embodiment of experience, nothing that experience offers is necessarily alien to it. Yet, in effecting that embodiment, it will choose with an aim which is not identical with that of



the philosopher, or the scientist, or the man of action, and it will bestow on the selection and handling of the medium a care which they need not always employ; if indeed the medium be not one of which they can make no special use. The aim of art will be, as Mr. Bullough has finely said, "Vision conceived in terms of the medium." It will not be a substitute for experience, but it will render permanent much that we should regret to lose, and the making of it permanent is itself a delight. "Even for the artist," says Mr. Valentine, "I can scarcely believe that the richest experience is always in the creative imagination; but rather that normally, especially in visual art and in music, the artist embodies his imaginations in a medium not only to communicate them to others, as Mr. Clutton Brock holds, but to make fuller and more intense his own aesthetic enjoyment. The testimony even of some poets goes to show that the impulse to write is dependent on a craving to enjoy more fully than can be done in mere imagination that which they cannot find in real life. 'If we had life,' wrote Wagner, 'we should have needed no art'" (p. 54).

These last words, however, somewhat overshoot the mark. Art is not merely an escape from the actual; its use is not "to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it," as Bacon conceived, or to seek, as with Pater's *Watteau*, "after something in the world which is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all." If we *had* life, in the sense of absolute experience, we should not need art—nor philosophy, nor any other of the means by which we attempt to retain and unify our fragmentary and elusive existences. But, while we are as we are, we shall need art; and if we are to understand what we are about, we shall need a sound theory of art—a theory which gives due place to all the factors of the aesthetic result, without over-estimating any; which sees the artist in his environment, not in a social vacuum, but which exaggerates the importance neither of him nor of his surroundings; which appraises the sensuous no less than the mental aspects of the work of art; and which regards no element of the whole as too simple for careful discussion and analysis. It is precisely because the British symposium seems to offer so many bases for the establishment and progress of such a theory that I have ventured on this commentary, with the further hope that on this side also it may serve as a rallying-point.

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